






# DO AND DARE

A FAVORITE WEEKLY OF YOUNG AMERICA

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No. 20.

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## PHIL RUSHINGTON'S SEARCH FOR THE UNKNOWN RIDER OF THE RING



BY  
STANLEY NORRIS

"DON'T BETRAY MY SECRET, PHIL RUSHINGTON."







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## Phil Rushington's Search; OR, THE UNKNOWN RIDER OF THE RING.

By STANLEY NORRIS.

### CHAPTER I.

#### A RUNAWAY.

"We're a rider short, Phil."

"How's that, Walt?"

"Eona's not able to go into the ring this afternoon. She's completely broken up over that trouble she had yesterday."

"I don't wonder at it. She went through enough, in that last town, to shatter the nerves of a much stronger girl than she is. I told her we'd try and get along without her for a day or so, but she insisted that she was able to go on with her work."

"So she told me, but I could see she was badly upset and not equal to the task. We do not want any accidents, Rush, so I took the responsibility of ordering her to remain at the hotel. I had to order her, for she would not have remained otherwise."

"You did exactly right, old man. An accident in the ring would not only be a bad

thing for Eona, but for the show, as well. I would like it, though, if we had a rider to take the girl's place. One of the other riders will have to double up—either Mamie, or Isabel? Will you see to it, Walt?"

"Certainly, Rush; but, instead of having one of the other riders do a double turn, how would you like to try an unknown—a hurdle-racer?"

The Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome had arrived, early that morning, in a small Southern town. The journey from the last stand had been smoothly made, and everything connected with the unloading, the putting up of the tents and the parade had run like clock-work. A number of exciting and annoying mishaps had marked the afternoon performance of the preceding day, and Phil Rushington, the young manager, was on the point of congratulating himself that the rough edge of things had been smoothed



off, when his assistant, Walt Arkwright, brought the announcement concerning Eona, known on the bills as "The Girl Centaur."

There was nothing startling in Eona's performances, but she possessed a delicate, spirituelle beauty and brought to her work so much of grace and charm that she always gained an amount of applause that equaled the "hands" given her sister riders, Isabel and Mamie.

For this reason, Phil, although looking upon Eona's absence from the ring as a necessity, nevertheless deplored it. Likewise, and for the same reason, Walt's mention of the unknown hurdle-rider claimed Rush's instant attention.

"Some rider seeking an engagement, Walt?"

"Yes. He's been hanging around the lot looking for you all morning."

"Some country boy, I suppose, whose eyes have been dazzled and head turned by the glory and glamour of the life as viewed from the seats. Probably he has learned to stand on his head on one of his father's plow horses and ride twice around the barn." Rush laughed. "I hardly thing he'll pass, Walt."

Walt laughed, too, but at the same time cast a puzzled look into his chum's face.

"In the old days at Springvale, Rush," said he, "you were something of a mind-reader, but you must have lost the gift. You're way off in that guess. The boy is a slender, well-dressed young fellow and looks as though he might be town-bred. He wouldn't give his name, or any other details connected with himself." Walt cast a searching glance about the grounds. "He doesn't seem to be here now. Probably he got discouraged and went off. I'll see Mamie and see if she'll do an extra turn. She's been practicing at standing riding, in the Roman fashion, and if she's able to do a specialty of that kind, she could make up as an altogether different girl."

They were on the point of separating, when a man in tattered clothes, his face dirty and covered with a ragged beard, slouched up to them. Removing the butt of a cigar at which he was puffing, the hobo took off his crownless hat and ducked his head.

"Say, boss," said he, "d'ye want ter hire a wild man fer yer menagerie—feller yer have ter keep chained an' that ye feed with raw meat every afternoon follerin' the big show?"

"Are you the wild man's manager?" asked Rush, tipping Walt a wink.

"Nope—I'm him. I make up fer the part, an' you bet it's a daisy."

"Well, sir, I can't engage you. We don't want any fakes in this show."

"Shucks! The public likes ter be humbugged. Ole P. T. Barnum said that himself. But, say, how'd ye like ter engage one o' these Missin' Links—a reg'lar What-Is-It, that 'u'd keep all the perfessers an' the scientific push guessin'? Hey?"

"Would you make up for that part, too?"

"Sure." He grinned. "Wouldn't have ter make up much, neither."

"But I just told you we didn't want any fakes."

"Well, I kin eat fire an' swaller b'ilin' lead. No fake about that."

"That's too old."

"I kin juggle with butcher-knives, boss."

"There are whiskers on that trick as well as the other."

"Mebby you've got an openin' fer a man ter sell peanuts an' red lemonade?"

"No. If you could ride a horse and turn a double-somersault through a burning hoop, or something of that kind, we might talk business."

"Ridin' is out o' my line. I might make a stagger ter hang onter yer trick donkey an' play the Rube."

"We've got a man for that."

"No other openin'?"



"No, sir."

"Then, possibly you've got a quarter you'd like to invest in a physical wreck that's pinin' fer a sandwich."

Rush tossed the hobo a coin, and the latter slouched off, waving his topless tile, and mumbling, "Thanky, sir."

Walt and Phil watched him as he shambled across the lot toward the road, but were suddenly startled by loud cries, a pattering of hoofs and wild rattle of a wagon.

Whirling about in their tracks, they cast quick glances across the open meadow that lay at the back of the tents and saw a four-horse mule team careening madly toward the lot.

The large wagon behind them had been heaped up with hay, but this load was being jolted off behind in forkfuls, and a trail of it lay along the zigzag route taken by the runaway.

A driver was still on the seat of the wagon, but he had lost all control of the mules, apparently, and could do nothing but yell for every one to clear the path.

"It's Reddy!" exclaimed Walt. "He went off to get some hay for the stock. Great Scott! The mules are heading this way!"

"Yes, and there's some one in the path they're taking, too," returned Rush, his anxiety and interest at once aroused. "If he doesn't look out, he'll get right in the track of the runaway. Hi, there! Come this way! Quick!"

A boy had rolled out from under one of the canvas-vans, where he had evidently been sleeping. No doubt the noise of the wagon and the shouts of the driver had aroused him, for he seemed half asleep and utterly bewildered. He started to run in one direction, and then, on hearing Rush's shout, turned and made in another.

As he voiced his cry, Phil sprang toward the boy. By some strange fatality, the mules

headed straight for the lad, and whenever he turned to get away, they turned so as to intercept him. Rush could not understand this, but just then he had no time to indulge in conjecture.

"Jump up into the canvas-wagon!" he called. "There, right in front of you! Hurry!"

The boy stood as though dazed, turning around and around. The mules drew closer and closer, bearing down on him at terrific strides, the driver tugging vainly at the lines.

But, at last, the lad seemed to realize his peril. Giving one startled glance at the runaway, he turned and started quickly toward the wagon from under which he had crawled only a few moments before. He had not taken a dozen steps, however, before he stumbled over a stone and fell. He tried to rise, but fell again, and then lay motionless on the ground, seemingly paralyzed with fright and incapable of exerting himself.

Some distance away was gathered a little group of employees and performers, among the latter being the star rider, Isabel, and Mamie and Dora.

The horrified cries of the women mingled with the hoarse shouts of the men; but all voices were hushed as Phil Rushington was seen to leap across the intervening space that separated him from the path of the runaway.

Half a dozen yards in front of the prostrate boy Rush came to a halt. Jerking off his coat, he began to wave it in the hope of frightening the leaders of the team, and causing them to swerve aside from the motionless form lying directly in their way. This manœuvre was unsuccessful, and Phil cast aside his coat, waited until the leaders were abreast of him, and then leaped and caught the bridle of the nearest mule with both hands.

There, swinging back and forth, but clinging like a leech, Rush hung, diverting the



team from its course and bringing it to a stop, the rear wheels of the wagon within an inch of the boy's head!

Jumping down, the driver flew to the mules' heads, and Walt, who had hastened after Rush, picked up the boy and set him on his feet.

"Why," exclaimed Walt, "it's the hurdle-rider, the Unknown! He got out of that by the skin of his teeth, Rush, thanks to you!"

## CHAPTER II.

### ANOTHER ACCIDENT.

"Encore, Rushy, me b'y! Do it ag'in!"

This from Mamie, the Irish girl, as she and the other two hurried to the scene.

"You saved the lad's life, Rush," said Isabel, the star rider, her beautiful face aglow, "and I feel as though I could give you a good hug."

"I not only feel that way," added Dora Warren, her eyes sparkling, "but I'm going to do it. There, now!"

With that she threw her arms about Phil and gave him a swift embrace.

"Don't be disappointed, Isabel," laughed Walt. "You may embrace me, if you like."

"I wouldn't be guilty of such poor taste," began Isabel, tossing her head, "as to——"

"I like that," mumbled Walt.

"As to embrace any one in a place like this!"

With a strange look at Dora, Isabel turned on her heel and walked off toward the dressing-tent.

"Sure," smiled Mamie, "the only thing Oi can see about the place at all, at all, is that it makes the rest av us a bit envious. But ye did well, Rushy, an' it's proud av ye we all are, though it ain't for us to express our falin's loike Miss Dora here."

"Supposing you had fallen under the hoofs of those mules!" exclaimed Dora with a shudder and a fond look into the young showman's eyes.

There was no doubting the object of pretty Dora Warren's love. She and Phil had been the very best of friends in their school days when he had attended the Springvale Academy and she had been a pupil at the "Norm" across the lake. In those times they had had some perilous experiences. Phil had saved Dora's life and, from that hour onward, fate had thrown them together often, and in the strange manner which fate has of doing things, until friendship had given place to a deeper feeling.

"But I didn't fall under the hoofs of the mules, little girl," said Phil lightly, "and I am glad that I was able to do the lad a service."

While speaking, Rush turned toward the boy. As Walt had said, he was well-dressed, of slender build and had about him the unmistakable air of one brought up in the city. He had short, curly hair and a pleasing face. As soon as he could do so, he caught Rush's hand in his.

"As the lady has just said," he remarked, "you have saved my life and I wish you to understand that I am grateful to you for what you have done. Am I speaking to Mr. Rushington?"

"Yes."

"I have been hanging around here all morning hoping to get a word with you. I am a rider, sir, and would like to have you engage me for your show."

At this Mamie gave the boy a critical glance. Evidently she saw nothing in his appearance to impress her with his horsemanship, for she flashed Rush a quizzical look as she turned away and followed Isabel toward the dressing-tent.

"One thing at a time," said Phil. "Why were you under the canvas-van?"

"I was tired, sir, and crept under there to rest. All at once I heard the runaway team and it frightened me for the moment. I had



been asleep and my mind was not as alert as it should have been. When I saw the mules bearing right down in my direction, I was bewildered and hardly knew which way to turn. It all seems like some horrid dream, and you know the rest, Mr. Rushington, as well, or better, than I do."

Rush addressed himself to the driver who was holding the heads of the forward mules.

"How did the team happen to get out of your control?" he demanded.

"They got scared at somethin' an' started for the lot lickety split," answered the man. "I threw all my heft onto the lines, but couldn't hold 'em."

Rush had a vague suspicion that all was not right. The mules had seemed to follow the boy whichever way he turned, as though they might not have been so much out of the driver's control as he had asserted. Yet what motive could the driver have had for seeking to run the lad down? None, apparently, and Rush dismissed his suspicions.

"You are helping the groom, are you, Reddy?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; by Mr. Arkwright's orders."

"Very well. Go on with your load. In future, however, see that you use a little more care if you have any desire to hold your job."

Reddy climbed on to the wagon and drove off. Rush watched and thought he saw him throw a malignant glance at the boy as he passed.

"Do you know that man, my lad?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Never saw him before?"

"Never, that I can remember."

"Well, let it pass. Mr. Arkwright tells me that you wish to ride for us?"

"Oh, yes, sir, if you will only let me!"

The boy's words were eager and an appealing look came to his face.

"Have you ever ridden in a circus before?"

"No, sir; but at the riding academy I——" He stopped himself abruptly. "That is to say," he went on in some confusion, "I have spent a good deal of my time on a horse's back, and I think I could please you if you would only let me try."

Rush looked at him thoughtfully.

"What is your name?" he asked.

The boy started to speak but colored and stammered.

"You must be frank with me," said Rush. "If you cannot convince me that you have a right to be here, I will not take you on, no matter how fine a rider you are."

"I cannot tell you my real name, but you may call me Francis."

"Francis what?"

"Francis—Carter."

"Have you run away from your home, Francis?"

"I have no home to run away from."

"No relatives, at all?"

"Not one in the world, Mr. Rushington."

There was truth in the boy's trembling words and Phil believed him.

"You look like a young man who has some means, Francis," went on Rush. "Are you forced to do this for a living?"

"No, sir."

"Then is it because the romance of circus life appeals to you?"

"Great Heavens, no! It is not that, it is not that!"

Rush was nonplussed.

"Are you trying to take refuge with this show in order to escape persecution of some kind?"

Francis shook his head.

"Then why are you so anxious for an engagement?"

"Because I must have it, sir!" he exclaimed, wildly. "You must let me ride! Oh, say you will, please say you will!"

Tears glimmered in the boy's eyelashes as he flung himself down at Rush's feet.



"Give him a trial, Philip," pleaded Dora, in a low tone. "There is something mysterious about him, but I am sure there is nothing wrong."

"All right, Francis," said Rush. "I'll give you a trial. We'll have to hurry, though, for it will soon be time for the doors to open. What kind of a horse would you like?"

"Any kind, Mr. Rushington," returned the boy.

"A light saddle?"

"No, and no bridle either. Just a band with a leather loop for the hands, that's all."

Phil called to the groom and gave orders for Eona's horse to be sent into the main tent. To this place Phil, Walt, Francis and Grout, the ringmaster, at once repaired. To the latter, the situation was briefly explained and he possessed himself of his whip as they passed through the dressing-room.

Under the large canvas everything was ready for the afternoon performance—seats in place, ring roped and tanbark spread. Rush and Walt seated themselves beside the ring and Grout and Francis went inside, the latter throwing aside his coat and vest and kicking off his shoes.

"Embroidered stockings, or I'm an Indian!" exclaimed Walt. "The Unknown is something of a dude, Rush."

"He's a lithely built, graceful young fellow," answered Rush, following the boy's movements with an admiring eye. "I have an idea, too, that he knows exactly what he's about."

Just then Eona's horse was brought to the entrance of the ring and turned loose. As Francis had directed, the animal was bare of trappings, save for a band of leather encircling the body back of the forelegs. To the band was attached a stout loop for a handhold.

On reaching the ring the horse, trained to the work, struck into a measured gallop and

Francis, giving a short run, made a standing mount with all the ease and grace of an accomplished equestrian.

"Yes," said Walt, "he knows his business all right. In fact, he goes at it like a master-hand. All this merely deepens the mystery that surrounds him."

Around and around the ring ran the horse, the boy riding with one foot on the animal's neck, then on the side at the hip and turning backward somersaults like an acrobat.

"Now for the hurdles," he said, as the horse slowed down for a brief walk.

The hurdles were brought and Rush held one at one side of the ring while Walt stood opposite with another. The horse was then put to the gallop again and Francis dropped to the ground and took each jump with the horse, each time landing lightly astride his back.

"I guess that will do," said Phil.

"But I'd like to show you the trick with which I shall end my turn," answered Francis. "Please let me."

"Very well."

Faster and faster ran the horse under the boy's nervous urging, aided by the ringmaster's whip.

"Now for the hurdles!" cried Francis, and Rush and Walt placed them quickly.

Just as the horse was about to reach the one held by Rush, the boy caught hold of the loop and lifted his feet in the air, all his weight imposed on the leather band. While in this posture, the horse took the hurdle.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Rush.

"Very well done!" echoed Grout. "This act is a winner, sir," he added, in a low voice, as he passed Phil.

Without lowering himself to the horse's back, the boy continued his gallop around the ring until Walt's hurdle was reached. The horse took this leap steadily but, just as he was poised over the hurdle, his rider dropped downward, voicing a startled cry as he fell.



Walt turned the hurdle so that the boy's head merely grazed it in the downward fall and the horse cleared both barrier and boy, being halted by Grout who leaped to the bridle.

Francis was not hurt and sprang up at once, the leather band in his hands.

"It was not my fault," he cried; "see! The band broke. Look at it, Mr. Rushington."

"I see," said Phil, taking the band and examining the break.

As he looked he gave a start. Then he looked closer.

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Walt.

"Nothing—now," returned Phil. "You have a very good act, Francis, and it is hard for me to believe that you've never been in a ring before. Do you care to ride for us after the two—accidents, you have just met with?"

"Certainly, sir!" answered the boy, considerably astonished.

"I should think you might be afraid of having more of these—accidents."

Rush placed a lingering emphasis on the last word and both Walt and the ringmaster wondered what he meant.

"I am not afraid, Mr. Rushington," said Francis, stoutly. "I will look to the strap myself, next time."

"It will not be possible for us to take you on for the rest of the season," continued Rush, "but I would like to have you take the place of one of my young lady riders who is not able to appear for a few performances."

"I do not want a long engagement," answered Francis. "Two or three performances, I think, are about all I would care for."

Phil was mystified. Here was a rider desperately eager for a short engagement, to whom a consideration of money counted as nothing and for whom the life had no attractions! What was there behind it all? Now, at the last moment, he was more than tempted to tell the boy he wanted nothing to do with him.

Something of this inclination must have shown in Phil's face, for Francis ran to him and began entreating for an opportunity to ride, if only at one performance.

"We'll call it settled," said Phil, although reluctantly. "I will pay you a reasonable price for the work you do——"

"That is immaterial. I will leave the matter of payment entirely in your hands."

"I will expect you to ride in the grand entry, and we shall have to find some tights for you, somewhere."

The boy flushed a deep crimson.

"If you please, Mr. Rushington," he answered, hastily, "I have a suit at the hotel and I would like to ride in that."

"It is about time for the doors to open and the performers are nearly all dressed, now."

"I will be ready in ten minutes."

"You evidently came prepared to engage with us," observed Phil.

"I was determined to do that even if I had to pay you something for the privilege of riding in your ring." While talking, he had been putting on his shoes, vest, coat and hat. "I will be back in plenty of time," he said, finally, starting for the door.

"Whew!" exclaimed Walt. "What do you make out of this, Rush?"

"Very little, as yet, Walt. I wish you'd bring Curly, the groom, in here. I want to see him for a moment."

Rush had something on his mind and Walt wondered what it could be.

### CHAPTER III.

#### REDDY VOWS VENGEANCE.

Curly, the groom, was a man whom Rush had once discharged because of a part he was bribed to play in a villainous plot which placed the young showman in peril of life and limb. After his discharge, Curly followed the show from town to town, begging Rush, at every opportunity, to take him back and give him another trial.



He was an excellent man around the horses and, besides that, he seemed so thoroughly repentant that Rush finally took him back. He was now on probation, however, and liable to discharge in case he showed the slightest laxity in attending to his duties.

When he sent for Curly, Rush felt that he had a case against him. In a few moments Walt came in with the groom, the latter looking very apprehensive and uneasy.

"When I took you back, Curly," said Rush, "it was with the understanding that you were to remain with the show only so long as you acted on the square and gave us no chance to suspect you of any underhand work."

"I understand that, Mr. Rushington, and I've been on the square ever since you took me back. I defy any one to prove to the contrary."

Rush held up the leather band for inspection.

"We had an accident while trying the new rider, Curly," proceeded Rush. "This strap broke while the horse was taking a hurdle. The boy was not injured, however, although he might have been—very seriously."

"I don't see how you could hold me responsible for the breaking of the strap, sir."

"All the horse trappings are under your charge, are they not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Could any one tamper with saddles, bridles, or anything else, without your knowing it?"

"No, sir."

"Then how do you account for the fact that this strap was cut three-quarters of the way through?"

"Cut?" gasped Curly.

Rush silently presented the two ends of the supposedly broken strap for the inspection of the groom. As could plainly be seen, the strap had been cut almost through with a sharp knife. During the greater part of

Francis' performance, the strap had held; but when he rested his entire weight upon it in a steady pull against the uncut portion, it had given way.

Walt and Grout were as greatly surprised as was the groom.

"I know nothing about it, Mr. Rushington!" exclaimed Curly. "I swear to you that I do not!"

"If no one could tamper with the trappings without your knowledge, as you have just said, you must know something about this, Curly. It will have to be explained."

"I can't explain it—it's a mystery to me. The whole matter looks bad, but I am innocent of any intention of doing wrong. Why, sir, the giving way of that strap might have killed the boy!"

"It might, certainly. Was the strap all right when you cinched it about the horse?"

"It was all right when I gave it to Reddy, sir. I looked it over myself."

"What had Reddy to do with it?" queried Rush, quickly.

"He was helping me about the horses, sir. Mr. Arkwright's orders, he said."

"My orders were for him to hitch up and go for that hay. The roads were muddy and he had to take four mules to draw the load. The man that Carpenter had contracted with for forage failed to deliver it, as you know, Rush——"

"Yes, I know all about that. Reddy told you that Mr. Arkwright had ordered him to help you about the horses, did he, Curly?"

"That's what he told me."

"Didn't it strike you as queer that another man should be sent to help you when there was not enough work to more than keep you busy?"

"I certainly thought it was queer, but I ain't supposed to know Mr. Arkwright's business."

"Well, you gave the strap to Reddy. He put it on the horse, did he?"



"Yes, sir, and then led the horse to the dressing-room. I don't know who took the horse from him there."

"You may not know it, Curly," said Rush, "but this is a critical condition of things for you. Unless it can be proved that you acted in good faith, the period of your engagement with this show is about up."

"Mr. Rushington," declared Curly, shaking like a leaf in his excitement, "if you discharge me you will be discharging an innocent man."

"I would like some proof of that, aside from your simple assurance."

"I will try and prove it, sir, if you will only give me a little time."

"You may have this afternoon, Curly, on the condition that you do not go near Reddy, or speak a word to him."

"Very good, sir."

Curly passed out and Rush and Walt followed him. Near the stable tent, sitting on a bag of oats and puffing at a cob pipe, was Reddy. He cast an inquiring look at the groom as the latter brushed past and then turned his eyes on Rush and Walt.

It was evident that Reddy had a premonition of trouble, for he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, slipped the cob affair into his pocket and got up scowling.

Reddy had been so nicknamed from the shock of fiery hair that crept low down on his retreating forehead, from a bristling beard of the same color that covered his cheeks and chin and from the purplish carmine hue of his complexion. Report had it that he was a prize-fighter, a hard citizen generally, and a man to be feared.

Walt had always entertained the idea that they would, some time or other, have a good deal of trouble with Reddy, but so far the fellow had broken none of the rules of conduct which Rush had laid down for the guidance of all employees about the show.

After putting the pipe in his pocket and getting up the driver lurched toward Phil with a tough swagger, head bent and murky eyes leering out from under their bushy red brows.

"He's a bruiser, Rush," muttered Walt. "Handle him easily and don't give him an opportunity to stir up any trouble."

"I'll handle him as he deserves to be handled," returned Rush, a resolute gleam in his eyes, "and if he stirs up trouble, he'll have to take the consequences of it."

Thereupon, Rush approached Reddy and they both stopped, the latter looking the young Springvale athlete over with an up and down movement of his shifty eyes.

"Reddy," said Rush, with quiet firmness, "I want to know why you tried to run down that boy with the mule team?"

"Didn't try to run him down. Them mules had the bits between their teeth an' I couldn't do a thing with 'em."

"You can't talk that to me! Whichever way that boy ran, you headed the mules to follow him. What was your object?"

"If you've been able to guess that much," sneered Reddy, "you can guess the rest."

"Why did you tell Curly that Mr. Arkwright had ordered you to help him?"

"'Cause Mr. Arkwright did."

"That's a lie!" cried Walt.

Muttering an oath the driver leaped toward Walt, but Phil stepped in his way, laying one hand on the breast of his red shirt.

"Out o' my way till I brain that dub!" growled Reddy, huskily.

"Stand where you are!" commanded Rush.

Reddy tried to shake off Phil's restraining grasp, but the white fingers twined themselves into the red flannel like so many prongs of steel, and Reddy was not a little surprised to find that he could neither shake off the hand nor back away from it.

"Mr. Arkwright was entirely correct," said



Phil, coolly; "you lied, Reddy, and you know it."

The driver spluttered, twisted and squirmed, but did not resort to blows. When he became fairly quiet, Rush continued:

"I've got another question I want to ask you: Why did you cut that strap?"

"I didn't cut it."

"What have you got against that boy, anyway?" asked Phil, disregarding the denial.

"Nothin', an' you can't stand there and make a fool o' me. Let loose! Break away, I say, or I'll knock out one o' your lamps!"

"I want you to answer my question, why did you——"

But Reddy was in no mood for answering questions. Thinking he saw an opportunity, he reached forward with his big fist toward one of Phil's "lamps." When the fist reached the point where the "lamp" was, however, the "lamp" had dropped a foot below. For this reason, the fist struck nothing but air, Reddy was hurled violently forward with the force of his blow and Rush tripped him neatly with an outstretched foot.

Reddy fell sprawling. When he sprang up, fairly frothing with rage, he found that the young showman had picked up an iron-bound tent stake.

"Is that a fair way to fight?" gritted Reddy.

"No," answered Rush. "I don't want a fight, and for that very reason I've armed myself with this tent-pin. How much money is coming to Reddy, Walt?"

Walt took a small book from his pocket and examined it for a moment.

"Something like nineteen dollars," replied Walt. "Nineteen and a half is the figure, Phil."

"Throw him twenty dollars."

Walt wadded up a bill and tossed it to Reddy, who promptly set his foot on it and ground it into the earth.

"That's what I think of your money," he fumed. "The twenty you owe me, Rushington, I'll take out of your hide."

"I don't think you will, but if you want to leave it that way, I shan't object. I'd advise you to take the money, though."

"I'll have somethin' better'n money, you can bet on that."

"It's probably needless for me to tell you, Reddy, that you're discharged. I'll give you half an hour to get your traps together and take yourself off the lot. If I find you here, after that time, look out for yourself."

Rush pitched the stake to one side and walked off toward the crowds in front of the tent.

"Where did we take Reddy on, Walt?" asked Rush of his old chum, who had followed.

"Edwardsville. He means mischief of some kind, Rush. You ought not to have given him so long a time to make himself scarce."

"I don't think I offered him any more grace than he'll find necessary. I'm as positive as I can be that he did his best to injure that boy."

"It's strange that he should want to do that."

"Very strange. In fact, it's part and parcel of the mystery surrounding Francis Carter—which, by the way, is certainly not the boy's name."

"I think Francis could tell us, if he would."

"I think so, too, despite the fact that he said he had never seen Reddy before. By the way, old man, was that cage repaired?"

"It was just hauled back from the blacksmith shop. When do you want the animals put back in it?"

"Not till to-night, just before we haul the cages to the depot. A good crowd, Walt!"

They had reached a point where they could observe the throng about the ticket wagon



and take notice of the jam in the chute at the entrance. It was a sight to bring joy to the young showman's heart.

"You distinguished yourself in that last town, Rush, and the news got here ahead of us. You're the best drawing card we have in the show."

Rush laughed in an embarrassed way.

"It wasn't much and, while I like to get the business all right, I hate to make a walking advertisement out of myself."

"Nevertheless, you can't get behind the fact that you've got a way with you that takes. Remember how they cheered you in the parade?"

"Yes."

"The people were glad to get a glimpse of you and they'll be disappointed if they can't feast their eyes on you during the grand entry. By the way, do you recall that it's high time you were back in the dressing-room making ready for the opening act?"

"That's so," answered Phil, looking at his watch. "Keep a weather-eye out for Reddy, Walt. If he's around here in half an hour, summon an officer and have him arrested."

"Trust me for that, Rush. I'll watch him as a cat watches a rat."

Phil always made it a point to take part in the "grand entry" when all his performers filed into the ring and performed various evolutions on horseback. He was a graceful horseman, and there is no doubt that his presence on these occasions, side by side with his beautiful star rider, Isabel, made one of the hits of the performance.

Dora Warren had had a little specialty in the song line, when she first joined the show, but she now devoted herself entirely to helping Rush and Walt in the management, taking care of the correspondence, keeping accounts, etc.—a purely mechanical part of the work which she did well and so proved of great help to the young showman.

Rush was a little surprised, therefore, when he mounted his horse and rode into the waiting line of mounted performers to find that Dora had taken the place usually occupied by Eona. The boy, Francis, was on hand, but was riding with the men.

Dora had created a habit for the occasion and looked very beautiful and dashing. Isabel was also there and likewise charming in her ring costume. The faces of both girls were slightly flushed as Phil rode up, and they were waiting, evidently for him. At once he saw the dilemma he was in. If he rode with Isabel, he would offend his sweetheart. If he rode with Dora, on the contrary, his star rider would feel piqued and might refuse to go into the ring. Isabel was subject to moods of that kind and Rush could not afford to have two of his girl riders out of the show that afternoon.

Mamie noticed his dilemma and seemed to enjoy it. No word was spoken, but Phil saw at a glance just what would happen whichever one he chose to ride with.

"It will be impossible for me to take part in the grand entry this afternoon," said he, calmly. "Some one else will ride with you, Isabel, and you will be attractive enough without me. Dora, it was good of you to come and take Eona's place."

Phil chose the least of the two evils and it was not entirely a matter of deceit for, at that moment, he felt a vague foreboding that something was taking place which called for his presence elsewhere.

"What is it, Phil?" asked Dora anxiously.

"I will tell you later, little girl," he said, riding close to her and speaking in a low tone. "There is no time, now."

And indeed there was not. The band struck up the air that heralded the opening pageant, the curtain was jerked aside and Isabel led the way out with one of the others for a partner. Swiftly the double-column



trotted into the ring, the curtain was jerked back across the opening and Phil was left to himself.

Hardly had this happened when Curly came hurrying in.

"This is luck!" exclaimed the groom, breathlessly; "I feared you would be in the ring."

"No, I thought best not to go this afternoon. But why do you want me? What's the matter?"

"I'm going to prove that I was perfectly innocent of cutting that strap, Mr. Rushington. I want you to come with me."

"Where?"

"Only a few yards distant. You will not need the horse. In fact, it will be better for us to go on foot. You do not object to eaves-dropping, do you, sir?"

"Well," said Rush, giving the groom a sharp look, "that depends. Whose conversation are we to overhear?"

"There are two of them, sir, and one is Reddy."

"Reddy is still around here, is he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'll go with you."

Leaving his horse, Phil accompanied the groom out of the dressing-tent.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### CAGED.

Owing to a fall from a platform car which one of the wild animal cages had sustained a day or two previously, several bars had been wrenched from the grating, making the cage insecure. On reaching the present town, Rush had caused the animals to be removed from the broken cage and the wagon hauled to the nearest blacksmith shop for repairs. The repairs completed, the wagon was hauled back and now stood, with both its painted sides in place, edged up against the back of the menagerie tent. Toward this

wagon Curly now led the young showman, first cautioning him to step lightly and preserve silence.

Halting at the side of the van, Rush laid his ear against the boards and listened intently. A mumble of voices reached him, but he could not distinguish the spoken words. Of one thing he was certain, however, and that was that there were two speakers—a discovery which bore out the information given by Curly.

Laying a hand on Rush's arm, the groom pointed to the end of the wagon where a barrel had been placed. Catching the man's idea, Rush climbed to the top of the barrel, the elevated position bringing his head close to the two screen-covered ventilators in the end of the van. He was thus enabled to hear distinctly all that was said.

"You think this is perfectly safe, eh?" queried a husky voice which Phil recognized as belonging to the hobo to whom he had given a quarter a little while before.

"Sure," answered the voice of Reddy. "That idea of mine about taking off the side, getting in here and then lifting the side back again, was a bright one."

"But the cage door is closed, an' it closed with a snap, too. It didn't lock, did it?"

"Bosh! Do ye think it's a spook cage an' can lock itself?"

"It allus gives me the creeps, Reddy, ter get behind a lay-out of bars. It don't bring back no pleasant memories, you can bet on that."

"You've been in the jug so much, Bumpers, that you ought to feel at home behind a grating."

"Quit yer joshin'—it's too delicate a matter."

"Well, set yer mind at rest about bein' locked in here. It 'u'd take a padlock an' a pair o' hands to do that, an' neither one is forthcomin'."



Rush bent down and motioned to Curly. The latter came quickly up to the barrel and Rush whispered in his ear:

"Go hunt up Mr. Arkwright and get the padlock that belongs to this cage."

An idea of what the young showman intended to do flashed through the groom's mind and he grinned slyly as he nodded and made off. Straightening up once more, Rush again gave his attention to Reddy and Bumpers.

"What I want to know is," Reddy was saying, "where's that paper?"

"That paper's safe, an' don't you fergit it."

"It's safe enough, probably, but I want to know where it is. Lovejoy and I have got as much interest in that as you have."

"Look here! Ain't you got no confidence in your pal?"

"To be honest with ye, Bumpers, I must say I haven't got as much as I'd like ter have."

"Some 'un said that there's honor even among—er—gentlemen like us, but——"

"G'wan! That's guff. Where's that dockyment?"

"I've got it safe, and I'm goin' ter sell it to the highest bidder."

"There'll be only one bidder."

"There are three people as 'u'd like ter have it."

"Keno—but only one with the money ter buy it. Ardsley, Frances and Levering. Levering hasn't a dollar an' is now in jail an' likely ter lose what little practice he had an' take a trip over the road inter the bargain, Frances has considerable money in prospect but isn't of age and can only get what Ardsley advances, so we'll have ter look to the major, himself."

"Major Ardsley'll buy it—mark my words."

"He'll get it, Bumpers, by hook or crook. If he don't buy it he'll have you waylaid an' the paper taken from you."

"Nixey! I'm too cunnin'. I haven't got the paper about me."

"What?"

"I say I haven't got the paper about me. I was afeared of you an' Lovejoy—a physical wreck like me wouldn't stand much show ag'inst a prize-fighter and a strong man. So I hid the dockyment in one of the chariots b'longin' to this show."

"Confound you, Bumpers! I've a notion ter choke ye for that."

"Don't do it! Hurt me any an' you'll lose a fortune. I won't come as easy as Frances, although ye tried twicet in that quarter an' couldn't make it."

"Look here, blast ye! What you tryin' to git at?"

"You know well enough. The Major 'u'd like ter git rid of both Frances an' Levering. You an' Lovejoy are engineerin' one job an' ye might let me look arter t'other one."

"You close your trap about that!" growled Reddy. "What good did it do ye ter hide that dockyment 'round one of the show wagons?"

"It'll do me a heap more good than ter have it 'round my clothes where you an' Lovejoy can git at it. Oh, I ain't so much, Reddy, but I know a thing or two!"

"Look here," hissed Reddy, "you tell me where that paper is or I'll throttle you!"

"Keep yer hands off o' me, or I'll yell. You know what that means. The boss fired you an' give you half an hour ter leave the grounds. Here it is over an hour an' ye hain't left yet. Rushington won't do a thing to you if he finds you here, I don't think. Keep away, I say, or——"

The words were lost in a smothered yell, followed by a heavy fall that caused the wagon to shake. At that instant Curly returned with the padlock, Walt accompanying him.

"What's the matter inside there?" whis-



pered Walt as Rush sprang down from the barrel.

"When thieves fall out," returned Rush, "there's a chance for honest men. Walt, you and Curly post yourselves at each end of the wagon and pull off the side when I give the word."

Walt and Curly took up the positions assigned to them, Phil standing in the middle, padlock in hand.

"Now!" said Phil.

In an instant the gaudily painted side of the cage was slipped off and dropped down, and Rush threw the hasp in the grated door of the cage over the staple and pushed the tongue of the padlock through and snapped it shut.

It was then seen that Reddy had Bumpers down in the bottom of the wagon and was astride of him with both hands about his throat. The tramp's eyes were bulging from his head and his face was growing purple. The sudden coup on the part of the young showman, however, caused Reddy to leap up and throw himself at the door. The stout bars trembled beneath the impact of his huge bulk, but remained firm as adamant. Bumpers sat up, gasping and trying to realize what had happened.

"Unlock that door!" fumed Reddy, shaking it with his hands.

"No," answered Rush. "I told you to look out for yourself if I found you around here after the half hour of grace which I gave you for collecting your traps and pulling out."

"Blast you, Rushington," grated Reddy, reaching through the bars and shaking a big, red fist at Phil. "You let me out of here or I'll kill you!"

Rush laughed.

"I wouldn't talk that way if I were you," said he. "It doesn't sound well."

"You've got no right to lock me up like this, an' you know it!" went on Reddy, fairly

beside himself with impotent rage. "I'll have the law on you! You'll pay dear for this!"

"The law is about the last thing you want to run up against, Reddy. It will be very easy to haul you to the jail and dump you out of this wagon into a cell."

"I'd like to see you try it on!" blustered the ruffian.

"Make too much noise, or use any further violence against that tramp, and you'll see me try it on quick enough." Rush turned away. "Watch them for a little while, Curly."

"Is it all right, sir?" asked the groom.

"Is what all right?"

"Are you satisfied of my innocence regarding that cut strap?"

"Yes. Only do as well in the future, Curly, as you've done just now, and you may be sure that I will have no fault to find."

Walt walked around the tent in the direction of the dressing-rooms with Rush, the latter halting when they had gotten out of sight and sound of the cage.

"We have no man on the roll named Lovejoy, have we, Walt?" asked Rush.

"No."

"Well, I'm pretty sure there's a strong man with us who is hand and glove with the rascals in that cage."

"If we've got a modern Hercules in this outfit, Rush, it's a new one on me."

"On me, too. Take a quiet hunt around and see if you can find such a fellow, will you?"

"Yes, I'll go at it at once."

"As soon as you can, relieve Curly at the cage. I want some one on guard there, and the groom will be needed at the stable. If you find it impossible to go in a short time, find some trusty man to go in your place."

"All right."

They started off in different directions, but Rush halted to inquire:



"How is everything going, Walt? I haven't been able to give much time to the performance this afternoon."

"Things seem to be running smoothly, but you made a mistake by not riding in the grand entry, Rush."

"I think not, old man," answered Phil, smiling a little as he thought of the dilemma he had been in and the way he had gotten out of it.

"By the way," went on Walt, coming a little closer, "has all this anything to do with that unknown rider?"

"Very much, I think," answered Rush. "Just how much, I intend to find out before very long. How's the boy doing?"

"Very well, Grout says. He went on for his act just as I started with Curly to go to the place where you were. Have you noticed that there has been a good deal of applause since then?"

"Yes. Well, find Lovejoy, if you can, and report to me. Remember, also, what I told you about relieving Curly."

Walt nodded, and made his way hurriedly around towards the ticket-wagon. Rush, passing the horse-tent annex to the main tent, stepped inside. The place seemed deserted, but, as he stood there, looking about him, a tumultuous burst of applause came from the other tent, the curtain at the ring entrance was jerked aside, and the unknown rider trotted through, the curtain closing after him.

The boy's face was flushed. His ring-costume was a handsome one, and he looked very well in it—in fact, too well. There was a certain effeminacy about his appearance which struck Phil, and struck him "all in a heap," so to speak. This might not have been commented upon by the casual observer, but Phil connected it with certain remarks made by the two men in the cage, and a startling idea flashed swiftly through his mind.

At sight of him, Francis smiled and waved his whip. At the same moment, however, he reeled, tried to recover his poise, and pitched over sideways. Phil was at his side in a moment, bending down and lifting him.

"What is the matter, Frances—Frances Ardsley?" queried Rush, hazarding a chance shot, and looking full into the rider's face as he did so.

The rider paled, and one arm shivered in Rush's hand; then she gasped, her eyes looking appealingly into his:

"Don't—don't betray me, Phil Rushington!"

Looking out from behind one of the canvas stalls was a man in tights. He clenched his fist, and a malignant expression overspread his face as he looked; then, quickly turning, he sped silently back to the dressing-tent.

## CHAPTER V.

### HOW FRANCIS BECAME

"I will keep your secret," said Rush, "but it would have been beter had you told me all in the first place."

"I feared to do so," she answered, suffering herself to be lifted by Phil and supported by his arm. "I thought that *he* might find out I was here if I once allowed my secret to pass my lips."

She looked apprehensively around while speaking.

"He?" returned Rush. "Whom do you mean, Miss Ardsley?"

"Lovejoy."

"Do you know the fellow?" inquired Rush, a trifle startled at the way certain incidents were dovetailing together.

"I never saw him," she answered.

"But you are looking for him?"

"Yes, in order to—to—Oh, Mr. Rushington! Will you be my friend? Will you help



me? If I tell you all, will you assist me to find the letter I am looking for?"

"You are looking for a letter, then?"

"Yes, and my life's happiness, and the happiness of another, as well, depends upon my finding it. Please say you will help me!"

She caught one of Rush's hands in both her own, and clung to it convulsively.

"You must tell me everything, first," said he, gently, "and then I will let you know whether or not I can help you in your search. All the men are in the ring now, and this would be a good time for you to return to the dressing-room and get into your other clothes. After you do that, come outside. I will be waiting for you."

She gave one long, appealing look into his face, and then hurried away. Phil wondered why he had not divined her sex before, since it seemed so plain to him now. Just as Frances disappeared, Curly came in.

"How did you leave the latest additions to our menagerie, Curly?" asked Rush.

"Quiet as kittens, Mr. Rushington," returned the groom. "The boss-canvasman came and took my place."

As Curly led the horse ridden by Frances into a stall, Phil went out and waited for the girl to join him. She soon came, again clad in her boy's clothes; and flushing crimson as she met the young showman's gaze.

"Come this way," said Phil.

He led her to the place where the band-chariot had been left after the parade. This was as retired a spot as could be found, and they seated themselves in the shade on a property trunk belonging to the musicians.

"Will you tell me how you knew that my name was Frances Ardsley?" asked the girl, with a shy look at Rush.

"It was partly a guess, on my part. I knew a little and made a jump at the rest. Just now it is not essential for me to explain. Will you please tell me who Mr. Levering is?"

The girl drew a quick breath.

"And you know about him, too!" she exclaimed.

"Not so much as I would like to know, Miss Ardsley."

"He is my—my lover, Mr. Rushington."

"Ah!" murmured Phil. "And Mr. Ardsley—Major Ardsley. Who is he?"

"He is my uncle and guardian, although I blush to bear his name. He is a villain, Mr. Rushington. When my father died, he left a fortune to me, and gave both myself and my legacy into the care of his brother. Major Ardsley was false to his trust, and is seeking to wreck my life—and my lover's as well."

"Will you tell me how, Miss Ardsley? That is, if it is necessary for me to know in order to understand about that letter you are looking for."

"I will tell you, because I want your help, and because you saved my life and have earned the right to know. According to my father's will, my money was to be turned over to me when I became of age, or upon my marriage if I married before then. Mr. Levering and I were engaged, but upon the very day set for our wedding he was arrested and taken to jail."

It was very trying for Frances to lay bare her heart, and Phil saw how great the struggle was, and dropped one of his hands encouragingly upon hers.

"On what charge was Mr. Levering arrested?" he asked.

"Robbery! Think of it, Mr. Rushington! There never was a greater outrage perpetrated. My uncle was knocked down and robbed a few miles out of Edwardsville, and he claimed that it was Mr. Levering who committed the deed. But it was false. The whole thing was planned by a man named Lovejoy, whom my uncle knew, and who is one of your employees. I know that much from certain remarks made by my uncle, and which I chanced to overhear."



Her bosom heaved fitfully, and she choked with indignation.

"Be calm," said Rush, "and let us hurry on to that letter which you are looking for."

"It seems so terrible, Mr. Rushington, that such an outrage could be perpetrated and all but successfully carried through in a country like this. Mr. Levering is a young doctor, and is struggling to get a foothold in his profession. He has not had much success, as yet, and he is not very well off, but I will have enough for both of us if I can only get my rights. A few days ago, late in the evening, Mr. Levering had a note delivered to him by an unknown messenger. The note was a written request for him to come out into the country and see a man who was dangerously ill. He never ignores a call of that kind, and he went at once. When he got to his destination, he was set upon and roughly handled by three masked ruffians. He was so badly hurt that he passed the rest of the night in a farmhouse, and did not get back to town until the next morning. On reaching his lodgings, he found an officer awaiting him. The officer told him that Mr. Ardsley had been assaulted and robbed near the place in the country where Mr. Levering had gone, and that he had been recognized as the thief. Mr. Levering explained, but to no avail. Then he was searched, and two discoveries were made—first, that the note written to him and asking him to come to the country had been taken from his pocket, and, second, that my uncle's purse had been slipped into his coat. It was all a plot, Mr. Rushington, all a vile, horrible plot!"

"It certainly looked bad for your lover."

"It could not have looked worse. I consulted a lawyer, who told me that if we could find the letter that called Mr. Levering out into the country it would be a long step toward establishing his innocence."

"That letter has probably been destroyed,

don't you think?" queried Phil, who was mentally trying to convince himself that this note was the one Bumpers had hidden. But why was that note valuable to Ardsley, as both Bumpers and Reddy seemed to agree? This was what Rush could not understand, and he was led to believe that there might be another document in the case.

"Oh, I hope not!" exclaimed Frances. "I thought Lovejoy might have it, and I dressed myself as you see and came on with the intention of joining your show, if I could, and thus placing myself in a position to watch Lovejoy, discover whether he had the letter, and, if possible, buy it. All of my life I have been fond of horses. When I attended boarding school, in New York, I spent all my leisure time at a riding academy; and when I was out West with my father, before he died, I had a horse of my own, and practiced various kinds of trick riding. I thought, if you once saw my ability, you would take me with you."

"You are certainly very clever on horseback, Miss Ardsley," said Phil, "but it was hardly right for you to disguise yourself and try to join a circus. It was lucky I found you out when I did. I pride myself on the *morale* of my employees, especially the performers, but it is impossible to prevent an occasional hard character from drifting in—as I have found both yesterday and to-day."

"I do not think I did wrong," answered Frances, firmly. "All I have done Mr. Levering would do twice over for me."

"Could you not have hired some detective to do the work for you?"

"Detectives are not plenty in Edwardsville," Mr. Rushington," she said, with a faint smile. "Besides, if I could have secured such a person, I should have been afraid to trust him."

"Your uncle, evidently, does not wish you to marry Mr. Levering."

"He has tried everything to prevent it,



threats, persuasion, and, lastly, this terrible plot. He does not want to give me my money. I am almost certain that it will ruin him to do so."

"If anything happened to you, to whom would the money go?"

"To Uncle Amos—Amos Ardsley is my uncle's name."

The mystery was rapidly clearing, and Phil was able to see through many things that before had been dark to him.

"You are in considerable danger, Miss Ardsley," said he. "I am going to be frank with you, because I think it is best that you should know all. Your uncle is being assisted in his nefarious work by three men—Lovejoy, Reddy, and a tramp called Bumpers. Lovejoy, as I understand, is with the show, and I have already taken steps to have him hunted out. Reddy was employed by me as a teamster, but I have discharged him, because I thought he attempted to run you down with that mule team, and because I am positive he cut the strap which gave you that fall in the ring——"

"Can it be possible!" she exclaimed, aghast. "Is my uncle so inhuman as to make attempts on my life?"

"I would not say that," went on Phil, hastily. "He may only have wanted to injure you, thus preventing you from searching for that letter and causing you to postpone your marriage."

"No, no!" said Frances, bitterly. "My marriage threatens his ruin; if he finds it impossible to prevent that, with all his trickery, why should he hesitate about putting me out of the way? A stroke of that kind would make my fortune secure to him. And see the cunning of it. If I was swept out of his way by a seeming accident, no one could be called to account, and I would merely pose as a victim of my own headstrong folly. Oh, what a conscienceless wretch he is! How basely dis-

loyal he has been to the trust my father reposed in him!"

"As for Bumpers," went on Phil, "he does not belong with the show, although he applied for a place this morning. I have cause to think that the letter you seek was in the possession of Bumpers, and that he has hidden it somewhere near this place——"

"You know this?" she interrupted, excitedly.

"I am almost certain of it."

"Then we must arrest Bumpers and force him to reveal the hiding-place of the letter."

"I do not think he could be forced to do that."

"Then I will buy the letter from him. I have not much money, but he is a tramp, you say, and what little means I have may be sufficient."

"No, Miss Ardsley, I do not think you have enough money. Bumpers knows the letter is very valuable and would demand a large sum. I have another way to deal with the difficulty."

Phil arose to his feet.

"You are going to help me, Mr. Rushington?" she asked, eagerly.

"Yes," replied Rush. "I am going to do a little searching and go at it in a peculiar way."

"You will first have to find the tramp."

"I know exactly where to go to put my hands on him. Before I leave, however, I want to tell you that your engagement with this show is at an end. If you had told me, at first, all that you have told me now, I would never have permitted you to enter the ring. More than that, I would have assisted you in your search just as willingly. Your position is delicate, as well as dangerous, Miss Ardsley. I could not place you under the care of my friend, Miss Warren, nor of any of the other young ladies, without betraying your secret; nor can I send you back to the



men's dressing-room for reasons which will be obvious to you. Therefore I ask you to remain here while I am gone. Be wary and cautious, and if anything happens to alarm you, hurry to the tent and ask for me. I will not be long away, and, for certain reasons, I do not think it would be well to take you with me."

"I will look after myself, Mr. Rushington, never fear," she answered, "and I thank you from my heart for all you have done and intend doing for me."

She reached out her hand and he caught it and pressed it. She was a handsome girl, and he thought how lucky Levering was to have so courageous and faithful a sweetheart.

Dropping her hand, he hurried off toward the cage where Reddy and Bumpers had been left.

## CHAPTER VI.

### AN EXPERIMENT.

Frances was known to Reddy and the tramp, although they were not known to her. For this reason Rush did not take the girl with him. He had in mind an experiment which he wished to make, and if the prisoners saw her they might suspect he had some ulterior motive. As for Reddy, Rush did not care so much; but he wanted the tramp left in complete darkness as to his present relations with Miss Ardsley.

The burly boss canvasman had rolled the barrel in front of the cage and was sitting on it, kicking his heels and alternately smoking and taking his pipe out of his mouth to guy the prisoners. At sight of Rush a broad grin stole over his face.

"I've just been tryin' to figger out, sir, what kind of animals these are," said he.

"Well," answered Phil, looking at Bumpers, who was holding on to the bars of the door, "that fellow wanted to hire out to me,

at noon, for either a Wild Man or a What Is It."

"I think he must be the What Is It, then, 'cause the other is certainly a Wild Man. Lor', how he's been carryin' on! He needs to be tamed, sir, an' I wouldn't like anythin' better than to tackle the job."

"If I was out o' here," growled Reddy, "I'd make a holy show of you in about six seconds."

Reddy was over in one of the farthest corners, glaring out of the shadow and talking to himself.

"I don't know what ye're keepin' me in here for, Mr. Rushington," sniffed the tramp. "I ain't done a thing. I was jest in bad company, that's all."

"Bad comp'ny!" sneered Reddy. "You're a bird, you are! You'll be posin' for a sky-pilot next. You've done more time in days than I have in minutes."

"He's talkin' wild, sir," went on the tramp. "Don't pay no attention to him. Somethin' must have gone to his head."

Rush came close to the door, the key of the padlock in the palm of his hand. Edging around so that the tramp's body was between him and Reddy, Rush gave Bumpers a wink and slipped the key into the padlock.

"So you think you ought to be let out, do you?" queried Rush.

"He hadn't ought to be let out any quicker 'n me," spoke up Reddy from his corner. "For that matter, you ain't got any business keepin' either of us in here, as you'll find out before I'm done with you."

With a series of lightning-like moves, Rush turned the key, opened the cage door, jerked Bumpers out and then slammed the door shut and locked it again just as Reddy sprang to follow his companion through the opening.

"Much obliged," said Bumpers. "That was close, eh?"



"What d'ye mean by lettin' him out an' keepin' me in?" demanded Reddy, furiously.

Rush made no answer, but turned and walked away, leading Bumpers by the arm.

"You've been badly treated, have you, Bumpers?" asked Phil, halting after they had passed around the circular wall of the tent and placed themselves out of sight of the cage.

"Well, I should smile, cull! This is the worst ever! I gets invited into a wagon to take a snack out of a bottle, and bang! First thing I knows I'm inside a cage, with no means at hand for gettin' out. That's kinder tough treatment, boss, ain't it, now?"

"Rather rough, that's a fact, yet hardly as rough as you were being treated when the cage door was locked on you. Strange that a man should invite you into an iron cage to take a drink with him, say nothing about his taking a sudden notion to strangle you."

"Gee! Say, boss, he jest got me in there to strangle me! His invitation for me to wet my whistle was only a bait. I was a fool for risin' to the fly, but I did, an' you saw what I got for it. Next time a duffer offers me a drink of whisky I'll call the police. You played it rather low down on me, boss."

"That's a fact—taking your story for it."

"Mebby you'd like to square yourself with me by givin' me a job?"

"Are you a good hypnotic subject, Bumpers?"

"You mean was I ever hypnotized?"

"That's what I mean."

"Nope—never had no one try. I'm a physical wreck, though, an' a horrible example, so I ought to come easy. Want to try?"

"Yes."

"Then open the throttle an' give her the sand. I'm ready. When ye git me fixed, jest gi' me the idee that I'm a millionaire, an' don't never wake me up. Are you ready?"

"All ready."

"Then—then—wait a minute! What am I goin' to get out o' this—a job?"

"I won't promise it. I want to see what I can do with you."

"Make it another quarter anyway, will ye?"

"I'll do better than that, Bumpers. I'll make it a dollar."

"That takes me right off my feet, boss. Go ahead. Be quick about it, 'cause I'm afraid ye'll change yer mind."

"Look at me, Bumpers!"

The tramp shifted his bleared eyes to a line with Phil's. Phil gave him a steady look and began making passes in the air. The young showman was no novice in the art of mesmerism, as the readers of this library may remember. Once he had mesmerized Walt and his cousin Mary, and had all kinds of fun. Now, however, he was seeking to turn his powers to a more profitable use, and he was glad to find that Bumpers was even a better subject than Walt had ever proved.

Finding himself "going," the tramp made a feeble effort to break from the thrall that was swiftly chaining him, body and mind, to the young showman's will.

"Look at me!" commanded Phil. "Fix your eyes on mine, Bumpers! You can't get away from me, you know you can't."

And neither could he. A few more passes and Bumpers was completely hypnotized.

"Are you up to your old tricks, Phil?" asked Dora, suddenly appearing on the scene and eyeing Rush in puzzled wonder.

"I am trying an experiment, Dora," answered Rush, never taking his eyes from his subject.

"What kind of an experiment?"

"I can't explain now. That boy whom I hired to take Eona's place this afternoon is over by the band chariot. Please go and get him, and then quietly follow wherever this tramp and I may go."



Dora departed, and Rush continued his passes for a little while to make sure that the brief abstraction while he talked with Dora had not lessened his hold on Bumpers.

Phil did not delay his experiment any longer than necessary, for he knew that the afternoon performance would soon be over, and he wanted to be out of the way when the crowd began to leave the tents.

"Bumpers," said Phil, speaking in a low, intense voice, "you had a letter that was written to Mr. Levering, had you not?"

"Yes," answered the tramp without the slightest hesitation.

"You hid it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want you to go to the place where you hid that letter and get it for me. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"There's a better show on the outside of the tent than on the inside," Rush heard Dora say behind him. "If the people only knew what was going on, they'd all be here."

Phil had no time to give to that phase of the question, for every faculty was bent on the work before him.

With his bleared eyes fixed and glaring straight in front of him, Bumpers started slowly off at a right angle. Phil kept at his side, and Dora and Frances wonderingly followed. Straight back to the band chariot the tramp led them, and at last came to an abrupt halt at one of the forward wheels, turning and turning as though bewildered.

"The letter," hissed Phil in Bumpers' ear, "the letter that was sent to Mr. Levering! You hid it about this wagon. Get it for me."

At the four corners of the chariot were gilded images, carved out of wood and representing Aphrodite. Up on the front wheel the tramp climbed, laid hold of Aphrodite's head and began twisting it. After a few turns, he lifted the head off, and Phil had

learned something he never knew before, viz.: that the heads of the figures on his band chariot were separable from the bodies and made fast by a screw and socket.

The head removed, Bumpers held it away from him and shook it until a folded paper dropped out at Phil's feet. While the tramp turned the head back into its proper place, Phil opened the scrap of paper and read the writing it contained.

A look of amazement swept over his face, quickly followed by an expression of chagrin and disappointment.

"Isn't it the right paper?" asked Frances in a tone of alarm that caused Dora to give her a curious look.

"Read it for yourself," said Rush, handing the scrap to her.

This is what she read:

"You come easy, Bumpers. I saw you put the letter in here, and five minutes after you put it in I took it out. Now, chase yourself! We've got leery of you and consider that you're out of the deal. LOVEJOY."

Frances was so disappointed that she began to cry.

"Never mind, little girl," said Rush, a little rattled at the failure of his experiment. "We aren't to the end of our tether yet. We'll find Lovejoy and get the letter from him."

"Little girl!" exclaimed Dora, drawing away and looking from Phil to Frances with gradually kindling eyes. "Is this supposed boy a young woman?"

"Yes," replied Phil. "I revealed the fact unwittingly, and——"

"And what have you and she in common, Phil?" broke in Dora. "Why is she dressed in boy's clothes, and why have you been so much together this afternoon?"

Dora Warren was a sensible girl and not given to exhibitions of jealousy, and Rush knew that everything would be all right as soon as she was put in possession of the facts.



So he told Dora, as quickly as possible, just how the land lay, and she became at once Miss Ardsley's ardent champion.

"You have Bumpers in a hypnotic condition, Phil," she suggested, "and why not ask him to tell what he knows about this plot of Major Ardsley's against Mr. Levering?"

"I doubt whether he will tell us much," answered Phil; "but there is no harm in trying."

Stepping closer to Bumpers, who had climbed down from the wheel, he made a few more passes, and then asked:

"Do you know Mr. Levering, Bumpers?"

The tramp nodded.

"And Major Ardsley?"

Another nod.

"Who planned the scheme to convict Levering of theft?"

"Lovejoy," came the instantaneous answer.

"Who set upon Levering when he was lured into the country?"

"All three of us."

"Did you take the note out of his pocket?"

The answer was a nod.

"Was it you who put Major Ardsley's purse into Levering's coat?"

Bumpers shook his head.

"Who did that?"

"Lovejoy."

Bumpers began to grow restless, and Phil made more passes, but could not quiet him.

"Who hired you to do that work?" proceeded Phil.

"I forget."

"Was it Major Ardsley?"

"I can't remember."

"This is all we can get out of him," remarked Phil to Dora and Frances.

"We've learned enough to corroborate all that I felt to be true," said Frances. "Now, if we can only find Lovejoy and get that paper. That in itself would be almost enough to clear Mr. Levering. The lawyer said——"

"Sh-h-h!" interrupted Dora, laying a hand on her companion's arm. "Here comes Mr. Wister. He's in a hurry, Phil, and hasn't taken the time to remove his makeup."

Rush allowed his eyes to follow the direction which Dora indicated by a nod, and saw Burt Wister, his versatile tramp impersonator, hastening toward them.

"What's the matter, Wister?" asked Rush.

"Mr. Arkwright has just been found under a pile of blankets in the stable tent, Mr. Rushington," returned Wister.

"Is he hurt?" asked Phil, with a start.

"Not much. He was tied hand and foot and nearly smothered, that's all. His first words were a request that some one should go for you."

"I'll be there at once." Phil turned to Bumpers. "Sit down here, Bumpers," he commanded, "and wait until I come back."

The tramp immediately seated himself.

"We'll stay with him to see that he doesn't get away," said Dora.

"He won't give you any trouble," answered Phil, "but it may be just as well if you remain with him."

Without waiting another moment, Rush made off toward the stable tent, accompanied by Wister.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A TRAIL OF MIDLINGS.

On reaching the stable Rush found Walt shaking himself to get the cramp out of his limbs. He was surrounded by a little group of performers and others, Mamie and Isabel being among the number. At Phil's approach Walt looked around and laughed.

"Well, old man," said he, "here's a go, and no mistake! Tied hand and foot, and my head muffled in a blanket! I could neither move nor make myself heard in any other way."

"You found Lovejoy, then?" asked Phil.



glad to see that Walt had come out of the affair so well.

"I should say so! Found him all in a bunch, so to speak. When I left you, I got the payroll and looked it over, but couldn't get any inkling as to Lovejoy's identity from that. Then I evolved a plan—a real crafty plan, Rush—and started off to work it. The male performers were getting ready for their spring-board work and were all lined up in the dressing-room ready to start into the ring.

"Placing myself a little to one side, where I could see the whole line, I shouted 'Lovejoy!' suddenly and loudly. One of the men started, half-whirled around, and then turned it off by fixing his trunks. That man was the one we know as Louis d'Or."

"That was a clever idea," said Rush. "You caught d'Or off his guard and made him acknowledge his proper name."

"He'll do!" declared Mamie. "Walt, av ye kape on as well as that, it's as proud av yersilf we'll be as we are av Rushy."

"Thanks, Mamie. If you'd like to hug me for that, why——"

"Get out with yer blarney, an' go ahead with yer yarn! Can't yez see how Rushy is waitin' to hear the end av it?"

"Yes," put in Phil; "I'm anxious to learn how you got tied up and buried under that pile of horse-blankets."

"Shortly after I spotted the fellow," continued Walt, "all the acrobats left for the ring. Thinking that all was fair in love and war, I stepped to d'Or's prop trunk and tried it. It wasn't locked, and I threw back the lid. The contents were in great disorder, and directly on top was a photograph of d'Or balancing a couple of cannon-balls in his hands. The photograph was inscribed 'Art Lovejoy, the Modern Samson.' Then I was sure we had our man.

"While I stood there looking at the pic-

ture Lovejoy suddenly caught me from behind, placed a hand over my mouth, threw me down, tied me with a couple of halters and muffled my head in a saddle blanket. It was all done before I could fairly comprehend what was going on. There's no doubt at all about Lovejoy being a strong man. I was like a child in his grasp. After he had fixed me up to suit himself, he buried me under the blankets, and Curly found me there a little while after."

"Lovejoy was sharp enough to know that you had found him out, so he sneaked back from the ring and took time by the forelock by getting you out of the way. What became of him? Have you any idea?"

"Not the slightest. He probably inferred that it wasn't healthy for him to remain around here, so he made himself scarce. He had to leave his trunk, though. But he had the forethought to lock it before taking to flight."

"That was a good deal like locking the stable after the horse has been stolen," put in Wister. "He should have fastened the trunk before you got a look at his picture—that is, if he wanted to do a real nice thing for himself."

"We must find that fellow!" declared Rush. "I'd give a good deal to know which way he went. Are any of the horses missing, Curly?"

"No, sir."

"He might have gone into town and taken the train," suggested Wister.

"There's been no train either way this afternoon."

"Well," said Walt, "he may either be in the town now or have hoofed it straight into the country."

"He didn't hoof it," observed Cartwright, the man who had been "on" the door. "I think I can give you the information you are after, Mr. Rushington. I was around in front a while ago and saw d'Or sneak out toward



the road. He had on his everyday clothes. His skulking manner, coupled with the fact that I knew he should be at work in the ring at that moment, aroused my suspicions, so I covertly followed him. When he reached the road d'Or halted behind a thicket of brush until a farmer drove along. The farmer had a 'democrat' wagon, and it was plain that he had just been to mill. In front of the tent his team took fright at something and jumped sideways, almost overturning the wagon and throwing out one of half a dozen filled sacks which he had in behind. He jumped out and lifted the sack in, and then drove on. When he reached d'Or, the latter stepped quickly out, passed a few words with him, then climbed into the wagon and they jogged along. I knew something was up, and came back here to report. I got here just as Curly found Mr. Arkwright."

"Now we're getting down to bed-rock," said Rush. "What kind of a team was it, Cartwright?"

"A white horse and a brown mule."

"They went west?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll have to follow and inquire along the road for a white horse and a brown mule. Saddle my riding-horse, Curly. It'll be rather a hard trail, but d'Or hasn't got much the start."

"The trail won't be so hard to follow, Mr. Rushington," said Cartwright. "The sack that was thrown out of the farmer's wagon was an old one, with two or three corn-cobs thrust into holes to stop them up and keep in the contents. In the fall one of the cobs came out—a little thing which escaped the farmer's notice."

"And the sack's contents sifted through the hole and left a trail in the road," smiled Phil, amused at the oddity of the occurrence. "Is that it, Cartwright?"

"That's it, sir. With sharp eyes like yours

you'll have no difficulty in following that thin line of 'middlings' straight to the farmer's barnyard—that is, if he doesn't live too far away, so that the contents of the sack do not give out before he reaches his destination."

"Did yez ever hear av the loike av that!" exclaimed Mamie. "I expect ye'll be afther makin' a Sherlock Holmes out o' yersilf, Rushy."

"I'm engaged in a search," returned Phil, "and I'm determined to carry it through to a successful finish."

"Shall I go along, Rush?" asked Walt.

"I've got something else for you to do, old man. Come with me and I'll tell you what it is. I'll take you with me, Wister. Get off your makeup and be ready to go."

Rush and Walt walked out of the horse tent and toward the place where Bumpers had been left with Dora and Frances.

"Walt," said Rush, "I want you to take the boy, Francis, and go into town after warrants for Art Lovejoy, Reddy and Bumpers. The boy will swear them out. Then have an officer or two follow Wister and me along that trail of middlings, and another come after Reddy and Bumpers."

"What is the tramp doing over there?" queried Walt, pointing to the place where Bumpers was sitting at the side of the band chariot.

"I hypnotized him and tried an experiment, which failed to work. I'll wake him up, and you can leave him with Curly till the warrants are secured and officers come for him and Reddy."

"The mystery of the unknown rider has been revealed, has it?"

"Yes, but in confidence, so that I am not able to give you any particulars, old man. In this search I am about to make I am helping Francis. After you start the officers along in the direction I have taken, come back and assume charge of things here. This matter



must be cleared up before we are ready to load the show to-night. I do not know how long I will be away, Walt, but I will surely get back in time to take the train. If I have not finished my search by that time, I will have to leave the matter in the hands of the officers. However, I am in hopes to wind the affair up."

When they joined the two girls and the tramp, Rush explained his plans, and Frances at once acceded to them. Then Rush snapped his fingers in the tramp's face and commanded him to "Awake!" Bumpers opened his eyes and looked around him, apparently very much at sea. At least he seemed to grasp the situation.

"Was I any good, boss?" he asked.

"About as good a subject as I ever saw," answered Phil.

"Do I get it?"

"You get this," said Phil, throwing him a dollar. "For the present you will have to consider yourself a prisoner. As you said, Bumpers, you were found in bad company, but you will have a chance to prove your innocence, if you can do so."

The tramp's bleared eyes opened to their widest extent and his jaw fell as he looked at Rush.

"Am I goin' ter be arrested?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"For what?"

"For concealing a letter in the head of that wooden image on your left there, and for various other things in connection with that letter."

Bumpers dropped back against the wheel of the chariot.

"Say, how do you know that?" he fluttered.

"After you were hypnotized, you were obliging enough to go and get a paper from the place where you had hidden the letter."

"And you hypnotized me jest ter make me do that?"

"That was all."

"Gee! If I ain't the biggest fool in seven States I don't want a cent! You've got the letter now, have you?"

"No."

"But you jest said——"

"I just said you got a paper from the place where you had hidden the letter. That paper wasn't the letter, however. Can you read writing, Bumpers?"

"If the words ain't got too many letters in 'em I can."

"Then look at this."

Phil handed him the paper that had been found in the wooden figure, and he spelled it through, his face twisting into a ludicrous expression of astonishment and chagrin as he read the signature.

"This beats the Dutch, by jiminy!" he exclaimed. "I'm ready to go to jail. In fact, I ought ter be behind the bars, 'cause I'm mentally incompetent, as the lawyers say, an' haven't -any right ter be runnin' around loose."

At that juncture Wister rode up, leading Phil's horse.

"Take care of him, Walt," said Phil, leaping into the saddle.

"And you take care of yourself, Philip," cautioned Dora, coming close and looking into Rush's eyes. "D'Or may have a revolver and do some shooting."



"If he does, little girl," smiled Rush, "I'll keep out of his way. Good-by!"

Every moment was of value, and Rush did not wish to lose any more time than was absolutely necessary. He and Wister rode off at a gallop. When they reached the road, Cartwright was there to point out the trail for them and see that they were started properly. The streak of middlings was quite thin but plain and easily followed.

"This reminds me of a game we used to play when I went to school," remarked Rush, as he and Wister started west at a swinging pace. "They call it 'hare and hounds.'"

"I've heard of it," said Wister.

For half an hour they continued their steady jog westward, and then the trail turned into a farmyard. The farm buildings were in a dilapidated condition, and everything about the place bespoke a shiftless and slipshod owner.

"Eureka!" cried Rush, as they trotted through the gate. "I don't know what a 'democrat' wagon is, but I'll bet something handsome that that's the vehicle beside the barn."

"I know what it is, and you're right," said Wister. "There are a number of bags in the back, and the one near the end-gate is less than a quarter full. That must have been the one that sprung the leak."

Hitching their horses to a couple of posts, they made their way toward the house, a freckle-faced little girl in a gingham dress and sunbonnet suddenly confronting them.

"Who lives here, sis?" asked Rush, stooping down and patting the child's cheek.

"Pap an' mam," she lisped.

"Pap just got back from town, did he?"

"Yeth, thir. Pap went for the grith——"

"The grist?"

"Yeth, thir, an' mam's givin' him fith 'cauth he loht a whole bag o' middlin's."

"That's too bad! Did any one come home with pap?"

"Yeth, thir, a man from town. Mam's givin' pap fith about that, too, 'cauth we don't want no visitorth, we don't, not when they come to thupper. Did you come to thtay to thupper?"

"No. Is pap and mam and the visitor in the house?"

"Yeth, thir."

"Thanks, sis. Here's a nickel for you. We'll go on and see pap."

Phil gave the child a five-cent piece, and he and Wister continued on to the house and rapped at the front door.

A man in overalls answered their summons.

"What do ye want?" he asked.

"I'd like to have a word with the man you brought out from town."

"Didn't bring no man out from town 'cept-in' myself, an' I'll be hanged if I don't wisht I hadn't brought myself, the way the ole woman has been combin' me down. An' all on account of a measly bag o' middlin's, too."

"Your little girl tells me you did bring a man with you from town, and that he's in this house now."

"Well, what of it? Haven't I got a right to bring a man from town with me if I want to? That's 'nother thing I'm gettin' Hail Columby for. I git so mad sometimes I wisht I hadn't been born."

"You'll wish you hadn't been born if you



don't tell the truth about this man you brought with you."

"Who be you so high an' mighty, I'd like to know? It looks a good deal like you'd come here to make trouble. If that's the case, you trot right off this forty, an' do it quick, too! 'Trot!'"

While the farmer was talking Phil caught a glimpse of Lovejoy leaving from a rear door and making off toward the barn, passing the well on his way. The well was an open one, with a bucket that was raised and lowered by means of a "sweep."

As he darted past the curb Lovejoy dropped something into the well.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Wister, excitedly.

"And here we go after him," said Rush, starting in pursuit.

"He threw something into the well!"

"I saw him, but we'll look into that after he's run down."

Lovejoy made straight for the barn and disappeared inside, Phil and Wister close after him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### LINKS OF EVIDENCE.

A ladder near the barn door gave access to the haymow, and as Rush and Wister hurried in they saw Lovejoy's feet disappearing through the mow opening.

In a trice Rush sprang to the ladder and began a rapid ascent.

"Look out for him, Mr. Rushington!" warned Wister. "He may be armed."

So Phil thought, and it was his aim to follow so tight on the fugitive's heels that he would have no opportunity to draw and make

use of a weapon if he happened to possess it. Hay was banked all around the square hole at the top of the ladder, and Lovejoy was floundering through it in his efforts to get away when Rush sprang upon him.

Lovejoy rose to his knees, faced about and threw his arms around Rush, and they went rolling over in a furious "clinch." Rush got a firm clasp about his antagonist's throat, and the latter compressed his locked arms until the young showman's ribs almost cracked beneath the terrific pressure.

It was patent to Phil that "the modern Samson" was no misnomer in Lovejoy's case. The question the youth asked himself was, Would he be able to strangle Lovejoy before Lovejoy rendered him helpless by that awful pressure? But the matter never came to such an issue. Their struggle in the hay brought them abruptly to an open door in the barn wall. They were on the very edge, and both released their arms to grab at something and save themselves a fall.

Phil succeeded in staying himself, but Lovejoy's wildly groping hands clutched nothing but the atmosphere, and he dropped to the ground. Fortunately for him, the ground was soft, so that he hardly bruised himself. In a flash he was up and heading for the place where Rush and Wister had secured their horses.

His object was plain, and his chances for escape would have been good had not a large, frowsy headed woman suddenly stepped around the corner of the barn. She carried an old-fashioned, muzzle-loading shotgun, and she raised it to her shoulder, cocked the trigger and drew a bead on Lovejoy.

"Stop, now!" she cried. "You stop, I say,



or I'll fill you as full o' holes as a sieve. I can see gallows in yer face as plain as I can read print in a book, an' it beats me how you ever got around Josh so's to get him to tote ye out here."

"Don't shoot!" yelled Lovejoy, in trepidation. "Take your finger off that trigger."

"Will you stop an' behave yerself?"

"Yes, only be careful with that gun; you're too confoundedly careless with it."

"Mebby I am, but I ain't keerless when it comes to hittin' a mark, 'specially a mark as big as you be. Come closter, Mister Man."

Lovejoy slowly advanced upon the threatening muzzle.

"Not too clost," said the woman, at last. "That'll do. Now set down. That's right. Got the tuck all took out o' ye, eh? My, but ye're meek as Moscs." At that moment Rush dropped down from the loft and approached from one side, while Wister, coming out of the barn door, advanced from the other. The woman never took her eyes off Lovejoy, nor allowed the gun to waver by a hair's breadth. "Who be you uns," she asked, "an' who is this man here, an' what's he done?"

"My name's Rushington, mam," said Phil. "I'm the proprietor of the show that got into town this morning——"

"Sho! Ye're right young to be the boss of a circus, 'pears to me. If Josh hadn't lost that bag o' middlin's we might have took in the puffomance this evening'. I'm M'ri Hackett——"

"If you'll come to the show this evening, Mrs. Hackett, and ask for me," broke in Rush, "I'll see that you and the little girl get in."

"Much obliged to ye, I'm sure. Reckon

we'll come. But you haven't told me about this feller here. I knew there was some- thin' wrong with him when he rushed through the house an' out the back door after hearin' you ask for him, so I took down this coon-gun and made tracks for the outside myself. What's he done?"

"He was one of my performers, and has done enough things to show him the inside of a penitentiary——"

"Now you're talking through your hat, Rushington," cut in Lovejoy. "Arkwright got to makin' free with my property, an' I didn't have to stand your layout any longer."

"So you tied Arkwright hand and foot, gagged him, buried him under a pile of blankets and made a run of it," added Rush. "You didn't even stop to get the money due you, or take your trunk."

"You'll find we aren't at the end of this thing yet," blustered Lovejoy.

"That's right," said Phil, "and you'll find you've got the hot end of it at the finish. Officers are coming this way after you, and they've got a warrant. Mrs. Hackett, kindly let my friend take that gun and keep guard over the prisoner until the officers arrive. I'd like to have you go with me to the well while I take a dip into the water in search of some papers that the prisoner threw in there."

"You won't take no dip into any water in that well, Mr. Rushington," said Mrs. Hackett, relinquishing the gun to Wister.

"No?" returned Rush. "Why not?"

"'Cause it's been dry for two months, an' we've been totin' the water from the spring down in the creek bottom."

"Good!" laughed Rush. "That last move of yours didn't pan out very well, Lovejoy."



Lovejoy had become suddenly pale, and he muttered anathemas to himself as Rush and Mrs. Hackett walked off toward the well.

Pulling down the sweep, Rush lowered the bucket to the bottom; then, grasping the rope, he let himself down into the dark depths, secured a white roll fastened with a rubber band and climbed up again.

Josh Hackett had joined his wife at the well curb, and the latter was giving him a tongue lashing for taking up with jail birds, "totin'" them home and letting them loose in the bosom of his "fambly."

Josh had nothing to say to her, but he sneaked around to Phil's side like a whipped cur and began to make excuses for himself. He perhaps feared that he would be haled to court to answer for what he had done.

"I bear you no malice, Mr. Hackett," said Rush. "It's true you tried to screen the prisoner when you met me and my friend at the door of your house, but I venture to say he had deceived you, and that you did not know what kind of a man he was."

"That's jest what he done!" declared Josh. "I'm a law-abidin' man myself, an' can't bear them as ain't. If I'd a-had the least idee the feller was a rascal, I'd have smashed him—yes, sir."

"Well," went on Rush, "there is no doubt but that you could be brought to book for what you have done, but I'm going to set off your wife's brave action against yours. You have her to thank for your freedom, Mr. Hackett."

Thereupon Rush gave his attention to the packet he held in his hand. On removing the rubber band he found he had two folded

papers. The first was the letter for which he was searching, and read as follows:

"DR. LEVERING: There's a man in bad shape out near the old Hadley place. He was thrown from his horse and has been unconscious for several hours. If you do not give him immediate attention he may die. Will you come at once? The messenger will take you to the place. AMOS ARDSLEY."

"Ardsley has signed it himself!" exclaimed Phil. "This gives Frances and her lover a better case than I thought."

The second document was the one that made the chain of evidence complete. It ran thus:

"LOVEJOY: Your scheme is O. K. I've picked up a tramp here whom I can depend on, and he will take a message to Levering, from me, that will get him out in the vicinity of the old Hadley place at midnight. The Rushington Circus train, as I understand it, will not leave until one o'clock in the morning. That will give you and your pal time to do the work after the show and then get away on the train. The tramp will help you. He's all right. Don't let Levering get away, and be sure and get back the letter I send him by the hobo. I'll be at Hadley's at eleven for the needed properties. My letter to Levering, and this one as well, I shall expect you to mail back to me at the first opportunity, and I shall withhold balance to be paid you until both are at hand. A."

"That clinches Levering's case!" muttered Rush. "This second letter is signed with an 'A' only, but the handwriting is identical with the other letter; in this he says he has written the other, and the other is signed. These documents will certainly bring about the release of Levering, and Major Ardsley will have all he can do to keep from going to jail with Bumpers, Reddy and Lovejoy."



Just then a sound of galloping came from the road. Rush cast his eyes in that direction and saw a party of four turning into the farmyard. Two were men, undoubtedly officers, and the remaining two were Frances Ardsley and Dora Warren.

## CHAPTER IX.

### CONCLUSION.

"Mr. Rushington," said Frances, as the quartet rode up to the well and drew rein, "is that man over there the one we are seeking?"

While speaking she pointed toward Wister and the man he was covering with the shotgun.

"Yes," answered Rush; "that is Lovejoy. Did you have any difficulty in following the trail?"

"None whatever," answered Dora. "These two gentlemen are the officers, Philip."

The men nodded as Rush looked toward them.

"We're to take that fellow with us, are we?" asked one.

"Have you the warrant?"

"We have. Everything is shipshape and we're ready for business."

"Where are the other two?"

"Behind the bars, by this time."

"Good! Take your man. He's the last of the trio."

The officers rode over to Lovejoy, placed him under arrest, and then began bargaining with Josh Hackett for a horse on which to take the prisoner back to town. Lovejoy was entirely subdued and submitted without resistance or comment.

While this was going forward Frances had

approached closer to Rush, and asked in a voice that trembled with anxiety:

"The letter, Mr. Rushington! Did you find it about Lovejoy?"

"When we went to the house to get him Lovejoy fled to the barn. I saw him throw something into the well as he passed it, and——"

"Into the well!" echoed Frances, chokingly. "Then the letter was destroyed and all our work has been in vain!"

"Oh, no," smiled Phil. "There happens to be no water in the well, Frances, and I climbed down into it and got the packet Lovejoy threw away."

"Then you have the letter?"

"I have, and it is not injured at all. There it is."

Supreme happiness shone in her face as she reached from her saddle and took the letter from Phil's hand.

"Why," she exclaimed, "it is signed by Uncle Amos himself! It will clear Mr. Levering, don't you think?"

"If it doesn't," returned Rush, "this will do so beyond all doubt."

He handed her the second letter.

"Where did that come from?" she asked.

"Lovejoy threw it into the well with the other one. The writing of letters has got more than one rogue into difficulty, and it is not to be wondered at that Major Ardsley fell into his own trap. Bumpers had the first letter and Lovejoy the second. When Lovejoy discovered the tramp hiding his document, it was easy to secure it and put the two notes together. In this way Lovejoy possessed himself of sufficient material to send the major to the penitentiary, and was un-



doubtedly going to hold the evidence until he got his price."

"Mr. Rushington," said Frances, "how can I ever thank you?"

"It's impossible for you to do it," returned Phil, smiling, "so I wouldn't try." Drawing his watch from his pocket, he had a look at the time. "If we hurry," he added, "we can get back and have a little supper before the grand entry. The officers have gone with Lovejoy, so we might as well trail after them."

Wister had already mounted, and now came forward leading Rush's horse. As the latter swung into the saddle Mrs. Hackett leaned on her shotgun and anxiously asked:

"You won't forget the promise you made about lettin' us in, will you, Mr. Rushington?"

"Certainly not," he laughed. "All you'll have to do will be to ask for me. Good-by!"

He waved his hand at Mrs. Hackett, Josh and the little girl in the sunbonnet as he rode away with his three companions.

"You will ride in the grand entry to-night, will you, Phil?" asked Dora, who found herself galloping along at Phil's side.

"That depends, little girl," he answered. "I could not afford to pique my star rider by not riding with her, for she might go off on a tangent, and the performance would lose one of its best features." Dora pursed up her lips at this and looked a little defiant. "On the other hand," continued Phil, "I could not bear to hurt the feelings of a young lady whom I like better than any other girl in the world, so—well, I may have to stay out of the ring again this evening."

"Not on my account, dear," said Dora. "It

was wrong of me to place you in such a position, but I did not think of all that it meant to you. I will not take part in the grand entry to-night. Will you forgive me for doing so this afternoon?"

"There is nothing to forgive, dearest," he answered. "I saw only that you were trying to help us out by taking Eona's place."

He rode close to her, kissed her, and they galloped on after Wister and Frances.

\* \* \* \* \*

Frances Ardsley's first appearance in the ring was also her last. On the way back she declared that she would ride again if necessary to fill out the programme, and she begged to be allowed to do so as a slight expression of her gratitude to Rush for all that he had done for her. While Rush could not very well refuse, at the same time he did not care to have her do this, and he was glad to find, when they got back to the lot, that Eona was on hand and determined to play her part as usual.

That night Frances bade Rush, Dora and Walt good-by and returned to Edwardsville, the prisoners also going on the same train in charge of two officers. For several days Phil heard nothing further concerning the mystery of "the unknown rider of the ring," and then he received the following letter at one of the towns where the Mossman & Rushington Circus and Hippodrome had pitched its tents:

"DEAR MR. RUSHINGTON: I am writing to you, from the depths of my heart, for the generous assistance you rendered Miss Ardsley in searching for a clue to prove my innocence in a certain matter which was explained to you by her. I was unfortunate and with only one friend in the world—the dear little girl



who dared so much in my behalf, and who would have fared so ill but for yourself.

"I was released from prison as soon as my lawyer presented my case to Major Ardsley. More than that, at the entreaty of the major, the case against him was dropped, he turning over to his ward every dollar of her money that had been left her by her father. The major was practically ruined, and has left for parts unknown to begin another and, let us hope, a better life. I was somewhat loth to let Ardsley go in this way, but Frances coupled her entreaties with his, and so won the day for the major.

"I was also more than unwilling to spare Lovejoy, Reddy and Bumpers, but it would

have been impossible to prosecute them without dragging in the major, and if we let the major off, there was nothing else to do with his confederates. At any rate, I have been sufficiently vindicated and am content.

"Frances and I are very happy, and feel that this condition of affairs is due largely to yourself; so, in sending you the inclosed invitation to our wedding, I thank you again and again, and beg to subscribe myself your sincere friend,

ARCHIBALD LEVERING."

THE END.

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